

## Sharing the Past with Our Present/ce. Performing Living Sculptures in the Traumascape of Stellenbosch, South Africa

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*The statue of Jan Marais at Stellenbosch University (SU) campus marks its site as a contested public space. It hinders the breaking down of segregation continuing in the former apartheid context of Stellenbosch, being read as a symbol for white supremacy. In March 2016 the site was explored as a place of performance during a ten-session course entitled 'Living Sculptures', in collaboration with 4 students of the drama department of SU. This creative collaboration aimed at investigating the possibility to raise awareness on and transform the relation between the passers-by and the site, through the presence of a performer being a living sculpture. This article outlines challenges encountered during the ten-session course and offers an analysis of the created The Bench Performance. It is argued that the strategy of the performer as a living sculpture strengthens the role reversal between the performer and the passers-by as well as questions the spatial and temporal boundaries of the site, both being a contested public space and an installed performance space. Hence it plays a particular role in installing an affective triangulation between the body of the performer, the site and the passers-by which allows a transformative process of meaning-making.*

### Contested Public Space on Stellenbosch University Campus

In 2015, a production team called Contraband Cape Town released the short documentary *Luiſter* (Listen). It presents an assembly of interviews with Stellenbosch students of color on their experiences of racial prejudice, violence and exclusion on the campus ground of Stellenbosch University (SU). These varied testimonies—which also provoked more people to share their stories through digital media—demanded the recognition of the continued spatial segregation at SU, which

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they claimed was partly instigated by the university (management) itself. They challenged the SU's professed commitment to diversity. Their website claims that the university's official strategic is to create a "welcoming campus culture that will make all students, staff and visitors feel at home, irrespective of origin" (Transformation and Diversity, n.d). Several Stellenbosch based student movements, such as Open Stellenbosch and Open Forum Stellenbosch, collected similar testimonies which call for the university to acknowledge that it has been a beneficiary of injustice, both in the past and in the present as part of the present (Apartheid Remnants at Stellenbosch University—The Open Stellenbosch Interview, 2015).

Within the context of this debate about the continuous spatial segregation on campus, some began to focus on the architectural fabrics of the university that support institutional racism. Historical buildings named after or depicting (pro-)apartheid leaders were criticized. These calls followed in the footsteps of the "Rhodes Must Fall" student protest movement which, at the neighboring University of Cape Town (UCT), had successfully demanded the removal of the Cecile Rhodes statue from UCT campus in 2015 (Schmahmann 2016). This movement sparked an operativeness to decolonize university campuses throughout South Africa, rising awareness and triggering reflection on the monumental presence of figures from a colonial past within university campuses amongst the students.

The statue of Jan Marais (Fig. 1), placed on the Rooiplein mid-campus in Stellenbosch, also received much attention. Erected in 1950 by Coert Steynberg, the statue depicts Jan Marais of Coetzenburg, a philanthropist who donated a substantial amount of money for the establishment of SU in 1918. Because of this donation and a lifetime advocacy for the Afrikaans language, Jan Marais is seen as a founding father of Afrikaans education and is held in high regard by the (white) Afrikaner Community (de Vries 2001; Nieuwoudt 2015). However, Marais is also criticized for his connection with early 20<sup>th</sup> century slavery, earning a fortune in the mining industry, and apartheid through his support for *De Burger* (The Citizen). This still existing newspaper was a proponent of the nationalist cause from its beginning in 1915. Since 1985 it abandoned its former role as political mouthpiece for apartheid by hiring progressive editors (McDuling 2014). Hence, parallel to the statuary figure of Cecile Rhodes at UCT, Marais is perceived as a racial icon, a symbol of white supremacy hovering the campus ground and sustaining an on-going legacy of segregation.

The site of the Jan Marais statue has become a stage for protest. In November 2015, members of Open Stellenbosch, a student movement of predominantly black students and staff at Stellenbosch University, threw trash at the statue, shouting 'They must clean, they must clean [the statue]'. In March 2016, a party poster was added to the statue by a student-member of the Economic Freedom Fighter (EFF) party, a South African revolutionary socialist political party, demanding emancipatory rights for black people. This act ended up in clashes between the EFF and the student civil rights organization AfriForum. Shortly after

that, a student movement called Volksverraaiers attached their own posters to the statue with the message that AfriForum and other Afrikaner nationalist movements do not speak for them. The struggle of these movements in claiming ‘their’ site of protest, heating the debate on the decapitation of the statue, is in sharp contrast with the average student’s indifferent attitude towards the statue. Although this site is a stage for protest and of contested history, the square is for most of them merely an ‘empty’ space they have to cross when hurrying from one class to another. As such, they hardly pay any attention to the statue of “*what’s his name again?*”



**Fig. 1:** The statue of Jan Marais on the Rooiplein in Stellenbosch. Stellenbosch, South Africa. Photograph by Marieke Breyne.

### The University Campus as Traumascape

I consider the site of the statue of Jan Marais a “traumascape”, a term coined by cultural historian Maria Tumarkin. Tumarkin defines traumascape as “a distinctive category of place, transformed physically and psychically by suffering, part of a scar tissue that now stretches across the world” (Tumarkin 2005: 13). ‘Place’ is in her view more than just a location and can be described as a location created by

human experiences, in this case traumatizing events such as the mass destruction at Verdun or Auschwitz. Whereas Tumarkin primarily defines a traumascap as an actual place of mass destruction, I translate her notion to a symbolic place which stands for segregation and the alienation and all the injustices it brought about for decades and still does today. I justify this translation by validating a recent shift in memory studies (Summerfield 2005; Rothberg 2009), that considers also the traumatic effect of non-eventful forms of trauma such as sexism, racism, political oppression and the daily fear of persecution.

Psychiatrist and trauma scholar Derek Summerfield regrets the limits of trauma studies when merely focusing on eventful violations, where 'eventful' refers to the presence of concrete violent, mostly physical 'events' such as killing or torture. He articulated several reductive implications of the dominance of eventfulness in trauma studies and urged us to include forms of continuous and quotidian violence such as racial discrimination in the field of study. Non-eventful traumatic experiences such as sustained racism and sexism can be equally traumatizing (Summerfield 2005; see also Stalpaert 2015a). The site of Stellenbosch University campus and the space around the Marais sculpture do not hold the atrocities as connected to places of mass destruction as Verdun or Auschwitz. However, the campus of SU and the monument of Jan Marais are a traumascap in the sense that they are part of the geographic epicenter of a suppressive historical political system of apartheid that was extremely violent and traumatizing.

The perception of a traumascap differs. A place consists of different layers of history, connecting differently with the bodies that enter that place. Memory scholar Andreas Huyssen uses the palimpsest as a major trope that ties together divergent artistic and media practices, constituting complex forms that generate public memory (2003). For some citizens, statues are a painful reminder of the traumatic legacies of violence, suffering and loss of that particular place. Others might not even be aware of the painful layers of history of that same place. Tumarkin's notion of the traumascap is particularly useful in investigating a transformative process of meaning-making between the body of the performer, the object and the passers-by, as she describes a traumascap not only as a painful reminder of a traumatic legacy of violence but also as a place to catalyze and shape meaning (Tumarkin 2005: 86). This resonates in my opinion with the legacy of apartheid, segregation and the commemorative potential that the campus and the site of the statue hold — up to this very day.

In this contribution, I focus on artistic interventions with the historical object (rather than the removal of the contested object, i.e. the monument of Jan Marais). Within this context, I discuss a collaborative workshop I initiated on the site of the Jan Marais statue with students of the Drama Department of SU in 2016. Embedded within a larger applied theatre project with facilitator Amelda Brand, I explored the students' experiences of traumatic stressors in the 'city'scape of the 'white' campus of SU. The following (theatre) research question was the starting

point of the workshop: ‘what are the challenges and benefits of the strategy of the performer as a living sculpture in a site-specific performance that attempts to raise awareness on or transform the relation between a passers-by and this contested place, including the statue of Jan Marais?’ The relation between bodies in this particular space and the object of interest got our particular attention. Art historian Brenda Schmahmann’s writings on the potential of performative interventions in renewing associations with the historical object, installing a transformative process of meaning-making between the body of the performer, the object and the passers-by, were an important inspirational source for the participants. Elaborating on the creative process of the workshop with students from SU, I explore the research questions and the artistic strategy of the performer as a living sculpture. Being an academic researcher and a performer myself, I acknowledge the transformative potential of performative objects as social mediators (Kennicot 2003, Cleary, 1998: 24; Lehmann 2006: 140; Bell 2001: 18-25). My research on the transformative potential on the performer as object is based on notions such as ‘the performer as a site of resistance’ (Bala 2007) and theatre scholar Fischer-Lichte’s suggestion “to reflect on the correlations between the concept of the presence of the performer and that of the ecstasy of things” (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 100).

The workshop in Stellenbosch was further inspired by my encounters with South African site-specific performances that inaugurate a particular embodied encounter with the performativity of a well-chosen building, landscape or urban environment. Two solo-performances worth mentioning in this context are *Chapungu – The Day Rhodes Fell* (2015) by Sethembile Msezane and *Pas In* (2016) by Kenan Petersen. I have met both artists at *Infecting the City*, an annual public arts festival that unfolds on the streets and various other public spaces in the Central Business District of the city of Cape Town, South Africa. The organizers aim to “bring engaged work into the public sphere, infecting the city with their own exploratory and exuberant energy” (website *Infecting the City*). Many of the productions invite audience participation and challenge the spectator to rethink the notion of how they use and interact with public spaces. It revisits historical buildings in the city center of Cape Town through site-specific work.

The two site-specific solo-performances established a dialogue not only with a historical building, but also with a historical statue. They investigate the relation between the performativity of the statue and the performer’s corporeality, using the strategy of the performer as a living sculpture. Both artists display an immobile body, rendering an uncanny resemblance with the backing immobile historical sculptural figure, respectively Jan Smuts in *Pas In* and Cecile Rhodes in *Chapungu – The Day Rhodes Fell*, apparently amplifying and simultaneously criticizing their existence. Resonating with my own performance practice, these performances directed the research question we engaged with.

In the subsequent part, I provide a description of my collaboration with students of the Drama Department of SU. The account of the first five sessions with

the students comprises the formulation of several challenges working as performers in public space in Stellenbosch and the students' intention to create a site-specific performance. In the second part I analyze the site-specific work *The Bench Performance* and discuss the strategy we used, namely being performers of living sculptures.

### Practical Sessions in Public Space

The ten-session course 'Living Sculptures' took place in March 2016 and involved four physical theatre students of the Drama Department of SU. It contained five preparatory sessions and five creative sessions during which the creation and implementation of site-specific performances were alternated.

During the initial meeting with the students, I outlined my artistic research, elaborating on the above-mentioned meetings with artists Sethembile Msezane and Kenan Petersen. This apparently excited the students. In order not to draw all the attention to myself, during the second class, I kept quiet and asked them about their experiences as creative performers. In this way, I found out that they had taken classes with the choreographer Samantha Prigge Pienaar, who as a teaching practitioner explores a personalized site-specific approach to performance (Bishop 2014), and that they were therefore familiar with performances in public spaces. The bodily more than the psychological translation of a historiographical research on a site and the performative strategy of the living sculpture-performer remained still new to them however. The site-specific solo-performances they created earlier during their studies highlighted, rather than transformed, their everyday experiences at for them familiar public places; mirroring the site's complexity and the often-precarious position of the body on that specific site. Hearing the students voicing their experiences of moving around in the public space of Stellenbosch as students and performers, confirmed my own experience of this space as having a tense atmosphere.

I believe the continuation of the system of 'urban disciplining' (Ferrell in Craighead 2006: 31) — a system of zoning principles used under apartheid to sustain power — has created a tension between inhabitants from the center of Stellenbosch and the inhabitants of the surroundings villages of Kayamandi and Cloeteville. As the boundaries of the campus of SU and the city center of Stellenbosch are unclear, SU students are often caught in this tense relationship. Above, on the campus itself, I encountered an agitated communication between authorities as the university security or the state police and the students, the university management and the students, and student movements interdependent. This tangible tension, inherent in Stellenbosch's public space, made me take note of the challenge to support the students in recognizing their bodily vulnerable position as performers, and, simultaneously, in performing their own body in public space in a non-violent way, reducing the risk being violated.



**Fig. 2:** Playing in the Langenhoven Student Centre. Stellenbosch, South Africa.  
Photograph by Marieke Breyne.

Preparatory work further included two practical classes in the public space, deliberately installed after the long verbal introductions, as opportunities to temporarily forget all shared reflections and start the creative process from a shared experience instead. For the first practical session we moved to the hallway of the Langenhoven Student Centre; a center located at the heart of SU campus that functioned from its inauguration in 1975 as a social and commercial student hub (Langenhoven-Studentesentrum in gebruik geneem!, 1975). From a balcony that overlooks the main entrance of this center, we observed the interactions of the continuously swarming Stellenbosch students within this semi-public space. As an introduction on performing a living sculpture in the public space of Stellenbosch, I asked the four students to position themselves in the hallway, individually or in pairs—while the others had the chance to observe the effect of adding these bodies to the place (Fig. 2). The students created their living still-life images independently, but we always agreed upon one common goal: the place-experience we aimed at creating was meant to transform either the rhythm or the direction of the passers-by, or their mood in the space thereby provoking reflections on the prevalent function of the place. The hallway of the Langenhoven Student Centre forms a busy passageway for students. Blocking the entry-door, for example by standing, sitting or lying in front of it, forces the passing students to search for another entry point and consequently slows down the rhythm of the pedestrian traffic.

However, this session unveiled yet another major challenge. While performing in the hallway we were captivated on security cameras, and more than once, security guards passed by to ask about our intentions. Mentioning the words 'Drama Department' magically reduced any fear for any possible political agenda and allowed us to continue our experiments. When the passers-by detected the intentional construction of the set-up though (for example when they noticed the documenting observers on the balcony) they instinctively changed their behavior and tried to not stand in the way of what they perceived as an artistic intervention, assigning what's going on to a 'stage' setup and becoming a passive audience, or avoiding being part of it by quickly moving away. This effect of drawing invisible lines between 'the normal daily space' and 'the sanctified performance space' was not only observable within the passers-by, but also within the performing students. They, for example, had difficulties to walk normally across the hallway to their immobile positions, comparable to a sheer walking over a theatrical stage that is, as known, one of the hardest things to do for an actor.

As such, the experiment in this semi-public space rose questions on the necessity to construct a performative space in order to be allowed to be present in the place and its effects on the passers-by and the performers self.



Fig. 3: Map of SU Campus. Stellenbosch, South Africa. Photograph by Marieke Breyne.

To kick off the fourth class, I gave each student a map of the SU campus and asked them to individually walk a route marked on the map. We agreed on a common meeting point during the tour to conduct an ‘automatic writing’ exercise. There, I confronted the students with questions concerning four sites the students had walked by, maybe inattentively, during their walk, four sites which I regarded to be very valuable places for performance interventions due to their historic and contemporary function and the spatial quality they offered as a possible traumascap: The Stellenbosch’s Sasol Museum, the building of the Arts and the Social Sciences Faculty, the DF Malan Building and the statue of Jan Marais of Coetzenburg on the Rooiplein. For each site I asked them to write down their answers to the following questions:

- 1) What do you know about this site?
- 2) What did you feel passing this site?
- 3) Do you think other people feel differently when passing this site?

The answers were not shared among us. These writings solely served as preparatory exercises in learning how to approach a public space which holds potential for performative interventions. After the writing, I handed out a bundle of short articles, referring to the different sites and their historical background with a focus on the apartheid era.<sup>1</sup> Concerning the statue of Jan Marais of Coetzenburg on the Rooiplein, the bundle included writings on Jan Marais’ personal life as a philanthropist, and accounted in detail Marais’ financial support for the magazine *De Burger*. Furthermore, the students received popular reports of the small-scaled protests that happened near the statue in 2015 and 2016. Throughout these articles diverse voices pointed at the strategy of SU to forget or deny to critically honor, or even to confuse, its own suppressive history of apartheid and white hegemony.

These articles fired a debate amongst the students. Andrico Goosen, a graduated object theatre maker I collaborated with in Stellenbosch in 2015, moderated the talk on my invitation. As a foreign researcher-artist I did not feel entitled to do so. Moreover, this outsider position permitted me to remain an observer of the situation I had provoked. Andrico summarized the students’ discussion as ‘the university must change’, adding a canny reply: “But who is the university? We are the university. Did we read upon it? No. Did we not find the university just awesome? Were we not focused on ourselves and the awesome time we have?” (Goosen 2016). Affirming this, the students debated their responsibility in sharing historical information on the diverse sites with their peers. They agreed that it is important to get to know the past the traumascap of the campus holds and to talk about this past as part of the present, as much as to avoid the affirmation of one singular truth, one master-narrative of the past.

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<sup>1</sup> The titles of these articles are listed at the end of this document in an Appendix.

The foremost urge was to share the sensed necessity of the historical research itself, its complexity and potential to spell out the construction of diverse narratives that exist side by side. Thus, the students formulated the objective of their site-specific work as ‘the opening of a relation of critical historical investigation of the passers-by with the site, triggered by the presence of the performers’ (Author’s notes from the discussion, 11 April 2016).

For the last preparatory session, we travelled to the public arts festival *Infecting the City* in Cape Town. There we experienced performances that embodied a continuity between past and present, implying a “cross-or multitemporal engagement” (Schneider in de Smet *et al* 2015: 7) and a “particular corporeal encounter with the palpable past” (*ibid.*). This consequently brought about a shared curiosity in the strategy of the performer as a living sculpture as a tool to dismantle the dominant memory regime that separates the past from the present. Or—reframed in line with the objective of the imagined site-specific performances as formulated by the students—as path to install a relation of critical historical investigation between the passers-by and the site.

### ***The Bench Performance: Benchmarking the Past in the Present***

After the preparatory classes we started up rapid cycles of conceptualizing and testing performances on diverse (semi-)public sites of the SU campus. In this article, I will focus mainly on *The Bench Performance*. The concept of this performance was initiated by student Samukelisiwe Dawn Maseko, referring to two incidents associated with the area of *die Vlakte* in the center of Stellenbosch. Following the Group Areas Act of 1950, different parts of the town were allocated to different races. *Die Vlakte* was proclaimed as a white group area, which resulted in the forced removal of people of color to their ‘own’ areas between 1964 and 1970. Also, schools, churches, and business enterprises had to move with them. This removal from *die Vlakte* allowed Stellenbosch University to expand its properties.

While reading upon the forced removal of the as classified colored and black inhabitants from *die Vlakte*, the following words struck Samukelisiwe: “On 30 October 1969, in terms of the Group Areas Act, the learners had to carry their school benches from the old school to the new school building in Idas Valley” (“Historical Background”, n.d.). This sentence, displayed on the website of SU, refers to the expulsion of all colored school children from the former Lückhoff School in the center of Stellenbosch. Upon reading this sentence, Samukelisiwe realized that she could not escape what she calls “the instant imagery the words evoke: you see them, a line of children carrying their benches” (Goosen 2016).

The second incident that inspired Samukelisiwe was the news, from mid-April 2016, of bursaries that the SU decided to grant to five students who were descendants of people who were forcibly removed during apartheid from *die Vlakte* in Stellenbosch’ town center. This policy provoked a debate among the theatre

students, discussing the allocation criteria to attain these bursaries, covering the recipients' class fees, and the broader pedagogical system of SU, benefiting only a part of the SU students. Samukelisiwe's investigation on the expulsion of the school children from *die Vlakte* and on the debate following the recently acknowledged bursaries at SU resulted in the conceptualization of a performance entitled *The Bench Performance*. She situated the performance on the site of the Jan Marais statue. It was composed of the following elements:

- two school-benches standing on the Rooiplein at approximately four and six meters of the statue of Jan Marais;
- one girl sitting on a school-bench, approximately four meters from the statue of Jan Marais. She is immobile, has one hand raised in the air with one finger of one hand pointed upwards. She is turned towards the statue and glances at it. She holds her immobile position for over three hours, alternately lifting up her left and right arm;
- two girls wrestling and holding fixed wrestle positions across a school-bench at approximately six meters from the statue of Jan Marais;
- one girl standing aside with a notebook, the so-called 'pamphlet person'.



**Fig. 4:** *The Bench Performance*. Stellenbosch, South Africa. Photograph by Marieke Breyne.

At the beginning, Samukelisiwe directed a combined staging of these elements, but throughout the testing of the performance adaptations were made, such as the removal of the wrestling girls and the addition of the ‘pamphlet person’, which I will discuss further on.

The title of the performance refers to the historical school benches removed from *die Vlakte*. Beyond this reference, the title also ties in with the whole dividing apparatus of apartheid, immediately triggering a link with one of the most tangible, and consequently popular, examples of this apparatus, namely the ‘whites-only’-bench. The use of two real benches in the performance, recognized as school benches, seems to have the potential to provoke the recollection of past violations, but also to raise the question of the possible contemporaneity and continuity of these events. Associatively linking the title with the idea of ‘benchmarks’ we could argue that the performance searches for a way to benchmark the relation between past and present.

The main artistic strategy was the presence of a performer as a living sculpture. One such performer is the figure of the immobile girl staring at the statue of Jan Marais. This constellation explored the potential of the living sculpture in a traumascape in Stellenbosch. Its particular site-specificity was considered by the students as ‘supporting a relation of critical historical investigation of the passers-by with the site’.

The girl, allowing an unthreatened double focus by any passer-by on her body as semiotic and phenomenal, acted non-violent and erupted non-violent actions, for that her safety seems guaranteed to perform. Secondly, her immobile presence strengthened the role reversal of the actors involved—the girl as performer and the passer-by as spectator, and the what Fischer-Lichte would call an “autopoietic feedback loop” (2008), a self-referential and ever-changing feedback loop (Fischer-Lichte, 2008: 38) not only between the mentioned actors, but also between them and the surroundings including the statue. This stimulated a meaning-making process in constant mediation, challenged the existing master narrative of the site and benefited the over-all objective of the performance: creating an investigative relation between the passers-by and the statue. Finally, the concept of the immobile girl, though clearly producing a temporarily theatrical space, suggests that we surpass the dubious appropriation of the ephemerality of that space by reminding us of a possible critical post-human reading of the performance. Such a reading, though, as described further on, is in practice not so simple to maintain.

### Allowing the Present/ce—Observation of the Performer’s Accomplishment

*A white young girl sits immobile on a school-bench, in the middle of the Rooiplein. Security watches her but doesn’t intervene. Passers-by stand still, take a look, take pictures. Some go*

*close up to the girl and try to speak to her. Most passers-by keep distance. Nobody touches her. The girl herself remains immobile and doesn't express feelings of shame or fear being exposed to many students and their cameras, and this continues for over three hours. Bearing in mind that the site is a stage for protest, strictly regulated by security, the fearlessness of the girl to perform and the absence of more explicit aggressive reactions within the passers-by or the security are remarkable. (Reflections by the author)*

The static and silent presence of the girl, reflecting the voiceless-ness of the disempowered, was seemingly power-less. In her immobility she apparently lacked agency, even humanity. But it is this strategy of reduced power by reduced humanity (Dyer in Sizemore-Barber 2016: 197), I would argue, that enlarged the power of her impact. It protected her from a forced removal by security, who interpreted her as harmless. The passers-by permitted her presence, as the girl herself, being a living sculpture, following the argument of theatre scholar Andy Lavender, was accessible and allowed the passers-by to maintain “an unthreatened focus” (2014: 13). The disempowered in-action of the girl can be understood as an invitation for ‘role reversal’ (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 50) between her and the passers-by, rendering the passers-by agency.

The long durational exposure of the girl to the gaze of the passers-by effected a plain possible oscillation, or rather radical converging, of the double focus on the girl's body as semiotic and phenomenal. All this allowed presence. The girl displayed a body-in-the world, and this embodiment could create “the possibility for the body to function as the object, subject, material, and source of symbolic construction as well as the product of cultural inscriptions” (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 89). The girl is perceived as a white, young, female human being and her body as, what Dorota Sajewska would call, “an archive” (Sajewska & Sosnowska 2016: 92) of histories. At the same time, through the duration and distinctiveness of the static performance, the girl's body became a semiotic body, a theatrical body deprived from history (Sajewska & Sosnowska 2016: 100) and present without any meta-physical dimension.

Perceiving a body that applies and denies an embodied history, specified as “perceptual multistability” by Fischer-Lichte (2008: 148), is destabilizing, and places the spectator—in the analyzed performance the passer-by—in a state of “betwixt and between” (ibid. 2008: 89). This liminal status brings along such a crisis, due to the collapsing of dichotomies and turning things into their opposites, that conventional behavior of the spectator does not make sense (ibid. 2008: 176 and 180). The political potential of the perceptual multistability that evokes a liminal state was illustrated in *The Bench Performance*. The sitting girl performed her white skin over and over again—demonstrating it in the immobile image she maintained for over three hours. As reasoned, being watched over again, she was perceived as a phenomenal and a semiotic body. Hence, her radical white presence discloses as much a potential critique on the undemocratic historically shaped

grooves of the society, as on the current over-determination of race in South Africa, whereby race becomes “a primary identity marker and often other spheres of power and social operation are over-looked because of this” (Craighead 2006: 23). So the double focus implies that the girls’ white presence, moreover than an instant aggressive reaction to her presence, can provoke the passer-by to question where to position oneself within these bodies of thought.

This is so for the passers-by, and for the performers themselves. Through approaching the body as a site of/for representation of the cultural codified, we can talk about and work with the pigmentation of the skin as a communicative sign. Samukelisiwe consciously chose to stage her white fellow student on the bench and not a student with a black skin color. The valuable ethical discussion on the contestation of the over-determination of race did not inhibit the collaborative creation process. On the contrary, it stimulated this process being part of the performance itself. This double focus may also clarify why the girl felt so comfortable to perform. The girl was never solely approachable as girl, as individual, private person. She was the image, part of the artwork. This made her, in Lavenders’ terms, “a transactional figure”, “safely isolated but willingly interactive” (Lavender 2014: 13) and enabled her to perform without any fear or shame. Even when the acts of the passers-by confirmed the objectification of the performer’s body, for instance when the passers-by recorded the body in close-up, these were not experienced as aggressive by the performer because the rules of the performance were self-imposed. The choice to perform and the fearlessness of performing, motivated by the strategy of the performer as a living statue, enabled the making of an artistic work without any means other than the body of the performer. In this light the students affirm that the experience made them “gain back the existing agency and ability to create, almost instant, a social commentary” (Breyne 2016).

### **Sharing the Present/ce—Observations of Participants’ Reactions**

The sitting girl, as a performance, was not clearly marked either spatially or temporally. Consequently, the guidelines for the passers-by on how to interact with the performance were absent. The passer-by had to continuously decide for him- or herself the duration and form of the interaction. This embodied encounter of the passers-by with the site, including the image of the sitting girl, gazing at the statue, allowed for a heightened receptiveness for corporeal responses and in doing so, gives the passers-by a “subliminal element of performativity” (Bal 2002: 209). The passers-by perform as much as the girl did, since they navigate both in the shared public landscape. Recalling the suggestion of theatre scholar Patrick Duggan, this implies that the passer-by can become a “co-creator of meaning” (Duggan 2013: 152), as the embodied encounter can stimulate the awareness and “response-ability” (Lehmann 2006: 185) of the political significance of the performance (de Smet et al 2016).

In outlining the merging of the semiotic and phenomenal body I have touched upon what in my opinion is the self-evident core potential of the strategy of the performer as a living sculpture: the girl is immobile but very much alive. She is, as a living material, internally always moving. And because of her long durational immobile position, her body processes exhaustion and pain; her living body is, what Shepherd calls, “a material presence” that “has an impact on the senses of others” (Shepherd 2006: 6). It is the real physical impact that forces the passers-by into a “visceral act of spectatorship” (Cassiers et al 2015: 286). The passers-by recognize her emotions as symptomatic for her pain, because, following Fischer-Lichte’s line of thought, they recognize the physical pain and the impelled intense emotions from other situations prior to the performance (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 153).

This experienced affect may change the passer-by. Affect could invite the passer-by to act. In this case for example passers-by stop and observe the girl, being curious about her possibly giving in to the pain and dropping her arm. Agreeing with theatre scholar and practitioner Mark Fleishman (2016: 16) that affect and knowledge are not antonyms, and Fischer-Lichte (2008) convincing us that meaning is not excluded from the physical experience, the affect might even transform the reasoning of the passer-by, rising questions on the relation between their own body, the performer’s body and the site as *traumascape*.

The sitting girl is an example of radical presence (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 99): the passer-by recognizes her as an embodied mind and consequently is capable of imagining him- or herself as an embodied mind. But, taken into consideration that the girl, as a living sculpture, also stages “an encounter with the fact of embodiment” (Lavender 2014: 19), the strategy of the living sculpture seems able to facilitate the passers-by willingness to imagine the embodiment to that amount that the passer-by questions its engagement in the meaning-making process. One of the involved students reflected on this in her own words: “You see the performer and you imagine yourself in that position. It is someone’s existence. The performer chose to give the body to this idea. As a passer-by I would wonder ‘Why, why would somebody do this? I would never do this. Why are they doing this?’” (Breyne 2016). The liminal status of the passers-by, according to Fischer-Lichte (2008: 67) present in any performance due to the contradiction of participating in the performance in a physical or affected way and the experiencing of the event as elusive, is sensed and questioned within the moment of the performance self.

### **The Performative Power of Living Sculptures – Bringing Sculptures to Life**

The performing girl gazes at the nearby statue of Jan Marais. Her young, female presence, immobile but alive, and her explicit gaze emphasize the presence of the statue and challenge its archetypical masculine appearance, its object status and monumentalism. During the whole performance, lasting for three hours without a

pause, she raises a hand towards the statue, as if she wants to ask a question, or ask permission to speak. This image of ‘inquiry’, as a literal staging of an inquiring student who is ignored by the teacher or the educational institute, resembles an instantiation of the unlearned performer that invites the other into a shared reflection process. The girl directs her questioning to the statue and interrogates the passiveness of this historical monument. Her engagement with the statue suggests a commitment to persistently acknowledge and investigate the presence of the historical object, or as Mark Fleishman would describe, “to unlock to movement inherent to the object from the past now displayed in the present” (Fleishman 2016: 17).

We can assume that the performer as a living sculpture establishes a relation with the statue of Jan Marais through the identification of its liveliness. The girl’s uncanny appearance can infectiously raise questions as to the possible animation of the object of the statue, drawing on psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch’s notion that the uncanny indicates “doubt as to whether an apparently animate object really is alive and, conversely, whether a lifeless object might not perhaps be animate” (Jentsch in Fleishman 2016: 18). Her presence, as any living sculpture “a biological embodiment and the embodiment of an artefact” (Lavender 2014: 21), can trigger an imaginary attribution of these qualities to the statue. This suggests that the embodiment, in this case of the immobile girl, can call attention to our “unfolding, embodying and co-emergent relations with our surroundings” (Stern 2011: 234). If we apply these insights to *The Bench Performance*, then we can argue that the presence of the immobile girl presents an opportunity for the passers-by to notice the statue and establish a relation with it. In line with the point above: the performer as living sculpture plays upon the characteristics of the post-human subject (Lavender 2014: 21) and invites us to revisit this site-specific performance from the perspective of critical post-humanism.

According to feminist theorist Karen Barad, ‘dead’ matter is “an active participant in the world’s becoming” (Barad 2003: 803). Both humans and non-humans are understood as performative agents, making themselves known to each other (Lenz Taguchi in Murris 2016: 288). From this perspective, the non-human statue of Jan Marais for example, has agency and —corresponding to the concept of “vital materialism” developed by political theorist Jane Bennett (2010: 89)— possesses the ability to make things happen and produce effect (Bennett 2010: 5). Applied to the site in question this means that the statue does influence the behavior and the emotional state of the passers-by. The relation between the human and the non-human, in this case for instance between the immobile girl, the passers-by and the statue, is determined as a relation of “intra-actions” (Barad 2007). This means that all these agents exist in mutual relation; they are because they are in relation with each other and influencing each other (Murris 2016: 280). Although they are related, they do generate meaning on their own (Pels in Fleishman 2016: 8). Implemented on *The Bench Performance*: the statue of Jan Marais generates

meaning concerning its own existence ('What is the statue?'), not only because it is animated by the presence of the girl as a living sculpture, as described above, but also because it has its own voice and emits messages on its own.

The recognition of the statue, and the whole site, as an integral participant in the processes of performance making, furthers dimensions to site-specificity, as the trendy engagement with the term site-responsive illustrates (Craighead 2006: 34). Further, it deflects the installation of one possible historical narrative on the statue and the site. The involved actors (the girl, the passers-by and the site) are affectively connected and move in an "affective triangulation" (Sizemore-Barber 2016: 194). They dialogue with each other through an autopoietic feedback loop (Fischer-Lichte, 2008: 38) that always impresses all actors involved. Consequently, they share a present moment of the making and unmaking of meaning (Heathfield in Craighead 2006: 19). In that way, the meaning of each actor cannot be fixed, but is always mediated through an affective and reflective interplay of all actors.

### Moving Past the Present/ce

The following remark captures the reactions of passers-by during *The Bench Performance*: "Are they fighting and do they need help, or is this contact improvisation?" The reaction also illustrates the confusion people were confronted with—is this protest or performance? It is clear in any case that the public place as trauma-scapes plays a primary role in the artistic intervention.

According to comparatist Loren Kruger, the city provides a playground, where the boundaries between spaces and times can be blurred while navigating the tension between extraordinary performative acts and ordinary daily life activity (Kruger in de Smet et al. 2015: 11). The role-reversal of 'the performer' and 'the spectator', as outlined above, *inter alia* incited by the constant collision and disruption of frames (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 48) and the encounter with the embodiment of an embodied mind, sharpen this tension. The enhancing presence of the immobile performer renders the site distinctly performative. The living sculpture performer her/himself is "a tense body, placed in everyday locations but not of the everyday, it is only effective insofar as it is unnatural" (Lavender 2014: 6). The student that performed the immobile girl reframed her immobility as a moment to focus on one thing and to create a world of her own. On that point, she admitted, she "cannot interact with the audience, as it's not her place" (Breyne 2016). This strategy therefore also seems to effectuate the creation of an unnatural body on a distance from the daily life and the people within, consequently transforming that site into the stage of a planned performance. Further on, there is a reciprocal relation between the recognition of the intentionality of the strategy by the passers-by and the strength of the intention. Another engaged student noted: "When people started to react, my attitude became more serious, my focus intensified, what

intensified the performance” (Breyne 2016). By this loop of intensification, this encounter, and this site, can leap out their daily appearance. A third student argued that “the performative space allows the not allowed to be allowed; the passers-by accept and understand more by this framing” (*ibid.*) as they needed to open up when confronted with the unfamiliar. At least this is the ideal scenario, of course others may simply turn away and refuse to enter this performative process. However, the passers-by who got involved in this constructed performative space, provided and shared by the performer, can invest in the space with new meaning.

Acknowledging the latter, paradoxically, induced foremost fear within the students. They struggled with the idea of a temporary transformation of the passers-by, implicating a limited impact of their creation due to the temporal character of the set-up and the imagined erasure of the performance on the moment the passers-by step out of the performative space again. It is this hesitation, I assume, that led to the creation of the figure of the ‘pamphlet person’. This person served as a first-aid during the performance, being visible and always available to converse on a more cognitive level with the passers-by who were affected by the performance. Personified by Samukelisiwe herself, in this case, the pamphlet person was standing aside with a notebook, a performative object easy readable as a container of knowledge. Samukelisiwe tested different strategies of sharing information—from answering questions to handing out a small print of Marais’ words as a material trace of the performance. Her contribution seemed relevant: passers-by approached Samukelisiwe to inform about the girl on the bench and they conducted very diverse grounded talks on the performance. Though, we could wonder if the urge to add a ‘pamphlet person’ really points to a deficiency in the set-up of the performance solely displaying the girl on the bench, or moreover to a disbelief or limited insight in its power to generate an affective triangulation and new meanings that surpass the timeframe of the performance.

Referring back to a critical post-human reading of the performance, we could argue that each subject is continuously ‘becoming’ (Braidotti in Murris 2016: 289), it’s a dynamic entity. Recognizing the statue of Jan Marais as such a subject means that its history can never be perceived separately from the present. Its presence is inherited from the past and the present and is in an always incomplete relation with all the other subjects that are becoming. On that account, *The Bench Performance*, as a collection of active subjects in an unstable relation of becoming, as Ridgway would say, “inaugurates not enacts” (Ridgway in Stern 2011: 234). The value of the performance lies in the entanglement of present and past. This prompts the possible critic that a performance consequently can never offer closure. A point which Fleishman counters with the following inspiring words: “We must embrace an anti-monumental impulse which in turn demands a persistent and active return in the work of remembering—a requirement to do it again and again, over and over in an embodied, sensuous and experiential way” (2016: 22).



Fig. 5: Statue of Leopold II. Oostende, Belgium. Photograph by Marieke Breyne.

### **Epilogue: The Impact of the Practitioner's Practice-based Work**

An image showing the statue of Leopold II was posted the 16<sup>th</sup> of November 2016 on a friend's Facebook-wall, with the question "How is it possible that this statue is, still, there?" Her father-in-law replied with the same image and the comment, "Pigeons, still, have to poo somewhere". Under continuous pressure of Labo Vzw, a Ghentian laboratory for societal transformation, the city of Oostende, merely two months earlier, had placed an indicative sign near the monumental sculpture of the Belgian king Leopold II. Beside some sentences providing basic information on the sculpture's materiality and construction, this new signboard included a short reference to the historic period of colonization, calling it "an item of continuous controversy". At the inauguration of this board, council member of the city of Oostende Bart Plasschaert spoke of his hope that activists would accept this articulation and move on since "the city has bigger problems than this" (Truyts 2016).

These matters are small indications of a discussion that is now emerging in Belgium but that came rather late, also in my own life. As a Belgian, it took me years of travelling south before I even noticed Leopold's carved presence in cities

like Oostende, Ghent and Brussels—all places which provide perfect space for protest due to their presentation of contested history. Because of my work in the South African city of Stellenbosch, I could no longer remain blind to the actual presence of a painful history in the country I was born in.

Focusing on symbols of white supremacy and privilege in South African public sites, the abundant public representation of King Leopold II, colonizer *par excellence*, in Belgian public spaces appeared to me. Learning more about the South African “Rhodes Must Fall” student movement and its resonance on a global scale, raising for instance a lively debate on the depiction of British colonizer Cecil Rhodes at Oxford University and the removal of two commemorative plaques of Belgian King Leopold II at the London Queen Mary University, heightened my acknowledgment of the policy of oblivion of Belgian municipal authorities that apparently have “bigger problem than this”.

Besides, being in the public space of Stellenbosch made me realize that I am privileged and, because of my white skin, represent a privileged position. Struggling with the experienced privilege of having for example the money to travel and the time to ask questions—and being constantly identified as a privileged person, which includes a questioning of my questions—I failed to imagine how to take up space in public, as a performing or writing body. This strongly influenced my choice to collaborate with South African students and guide them through the described ten session course. Via this pedagogical position of being their ‘mentor’, I aimed, instead of creating an artwork myself, to facilitate a creative space for others, in this case foremost the theatre students. Though well-intentioned, it remains questionable if this chosen position points as much to cowardice and disguised power, illustrated in the actual apparition of this writing, which remains a report from a non-African practitioner on an experiment, conducted far away from home.

#### Appendix: The titles of the articles I shared with the students

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